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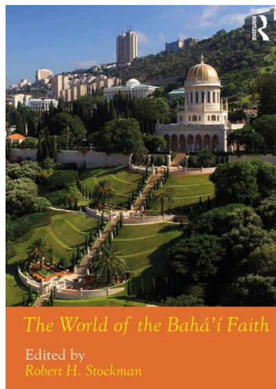

The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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The History of the BáBí and Bahá'í Faiths

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THE HISTORY OF THE BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í FAITHS

Peter Smith

Bábí-Bahá'í history can be seen as a complex whole, in which a messianic sect of Shi'i Islam eventually developed into a widely spread global religious movement. Shoghi Effendi described this as a process of transformation whereby 'a heterodox and seemingly negligible offshoot of the Shaykhi school of the Ithná-'Asharíyyih [i.e. "Twelver"] sect of Shí'ah Islám' developed into a 'world religion' (*God Passes By*, xii). This history can be summarized in terms of three main stages, each with its particular 'world' of expansion: 1) an initial '*Islamic*' stage from the Báb's declaration in 1844 up until about the time of the passing of the Bahá'í prophet-founder Bahá'u'lláh in 1892, in which Babism and the early Bahá'í movement were largely confined to the environing culture and society of the Islamic Middle East and its cultural extensions; 2) an '*international*' stage from the accession of Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, to leadership of the Bahá'í Cause in 1892 up until about 1953, during which Bahá'í expansion succeeded in transcending the religion's Islamic roots, in particular by gaining a small but intensely active Western following; and 3) the present '*global*' stage from about 1953 onwards, in which the Bahá'í Faith has begun to assume the characteristics of a small-scale world religion, and larger numbers of adherents have been gained, particularly in some parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America—regions of the Global South that we might describe as a 'third Bahá'í World'—that are outside of both the religion's original Islamic heartland and the West (Smith 2016, 1987: 162–171).

The 'Islamic' phase, 1844–c. 1892

The Bábí movement

The Bábí movement began in May 1844 with the initial declaration of mission by Sayyid 'Alí-Muḥammad (1819–1850), a merchant from the southern Iranian city of Shiraz. Widely understood to be claiming to be the *Báb*, or 'gate', the intermediary between the messianic figure of the Hidden Twelfth Imam and the faithful, 'Alí-Muḥammad soon attracted a sizable following amongst the Shi'is of Iran and to a lesser extent Ottoman Iraq (Amanat 1989; MacEoin 1992, 2008; Smith 1987: 5–56, 2008: 3–15). The initial core of this movement was made up of junior clerics from the Shaykhi sect, an unorthodox version of Shi'ism whose adherents believed in the vital role of living spiritual masters, the esoteric interpretation of prophecy, and extreme

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veneration for the Imams. Some Shaykhis also believed—as did many other Shi'is—that the time of the Hidden Imam's return was fast approaching, seeing the Báb's claims as fulfilment of this expectation (the Imam had allegedly gone into hiding in the spiritual realm in the Islamic year 260 [873 CE], and might be expected to return a thousand [lunar] years later in 1260 [1844 CE]).

The claim to be the Imam's representative was an implicitly revolutionary act, for in a Shi'i universe, at the time of the Imam's return, both secular and religious leaders could only retain their authority by the permission of the Imam or his representative. Unsurprisingly therefore, whilst a few non-Shaykhi clerics converted to the new movement, many quickly became implacably opposed, declaring its leader and His followers to be apostates. The attitude of the secular elite was more mixed, however, some prominent leaders—including Muḥammad-Sháh himself (reg. 1834–1848), and Manúchihr Khán, the powerful governor of Isfahan who gave the Báb refuge—seeing the Báb as a pious man worthy of respect, or perhaps as the leader of a popular religious movement which could challenge the power of the over-mighty higher clerics. Whatever the case, the possibilities of state support ended with the death of Manúchihr Khán in February 1847. The Báb was subsequently discovered in the governor's palace, placed under armed guard at the order of the chief minister, Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí, and exiled as a prisoner to Iran's remote northwest.

Devoting Himself to prayer and 'revealing verses', the Báb began to change the nature of His message during His confinement. According to one reading of His early writings in Shiraz (notably the Qayyumu'l-Asmá [1844]), He had already hinted at higher claims to authority at the very beginning of His ministry, but these higher claims now became explicit, with claims both to be the promised Imam himself (i.e. the Mahdí ['the rightly-guided one'] or Qá'im ['the one who will arise']), and later—and more challengingly—to be the inaugurator of a new divine revelation. He also revealed His own book of laws (the Bayán, or 'Exposition') to replace the Qur'an, announced the future advent of a further messianic figure, and in a dramatic trial in front of the Crown Prince in the regional capital of Tabriz in July 1848, laid public claim to be the awaited Qá'im: the breach with Shi'i orthodoxy thereby becoming absolute.

Meanwhile, the Báb's missionaries, headed by His inner circle of disciples, the 'Letters of the Living', had dispersed through much of Iran and established a wide-flung network of Bábí cells. Significantly, following the conversion of locally important non-Shaykhi clerics, large Bábí communities were also developing in the small southern town of Nayriz, and the important northern town of Zanjan. There was also a wider circle of sympathizers who regarded the Báb as a holy man and miracle worker without having any deep knowledge of Bábí beliefs.

The Báb's imprisonment created a crisis for the other Bábí leaders. What should they do? Details are sometimes obscure, but one contingent of several hundred Bábís assembled in the north-eastern shrine-city of Mashhad and began a long march to the west. Many were armed, and according to some accounts, they carried with them the 'Black Standard', a traditional symbol of messianic proclamation and possibly revolt. Their intentions are unclear—perhaps some wanted to release the Báb from His remote captivity (the modern road distance from Mashhad in the northeast to Tabriz in the northwest is over 1,500 kilometres [almost 1,000 miles]), but in the event, they came into conflict with local Muslim forces at the town of Barfarúsh (modern Bábul), on the Caspian coast. Retreating to the local shrine of Shaykh Ṭabarsí, they turned it into a fortified centre from which they might promote their cause. Government troops were summoned and a protracted siege ensued. The death of the Shah in September 1848 threatened further instability, but the Bábís proved hard to dislodge, and during seven months of armed conflict the Bábís fought with great fervour, repeatedly beating off forces many times their number. For both the Bábís and at least some of their attackers, the fighting evoked the powerful Shi'i symbol of Karbala in 680 CE, when the Shi'i Imam Ḥusayn had led a small band of followers

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against the might of the Umayyad army. Eventually, weakened by hunger, the Bábís responded to a false truce and were massacred or enslaved (in May 1849).

Opinions remain divided as to what exactly the Bábís' intentions were at Ṭabarsí. The government authorities portrayed the Bábís as fanatical insurrectionaries, a view echoed by some later historians, but adventitious local factors were certainly involved in the outbreak of the fighting, and once the conflict had begun, the Bábís did not make a concerted effort to establish themselves as local rulers, but rather drew on the Shi'i motifs of sacrificial martyrdom and resistance to oppression whilst dispatching many of their opponents 'to hell'. Similarly, opinions differ as to the causes of the other two major Bábí conflicts—at Nayriz and Zanjan, both of which began in May 1850 (a year after the suppression of the Ṭabarsí conflict), and continuing until June 1850 and January 1851 respectively. Certainly involving local antagonisms, and exacerbated by the presence of large Bábí minorities led by forceful clerics, both struggles involved bitter urban fighting in which fervent Bábí fighters battled determinedly against superior forces of local militias and government troops before eventually responding to false truces and being destroyed.

Seeing the government's and local authorities' weakness against small bands of armed Bábís, the new chief minister, Mírzá Taqí Khán, 'Amír Kabír', decided to put an end to the movement altogether by ordering the execution of the Báb. The execution was carried out in Tabriz in July 1850, and everywhere the remaining Bábís faced the possibility of persecution. Despite the loss of their prophet and most of their leaders, the movement continued, however, albeit now fractured into a number of underground cells following a variety of new leaders. By 1852, one of these cells determined to avenge the death of the Báb by assassinating the young king Náṣiru'd-dín Sháh. The attempt (in August 1852) was botched by the inexperienced would-be assassins, and the lightly wounded king ordered that the remaining Bábí leaders should be rounded up. Despite the majority of the Bábís not having been involved in the plot, they were punished severely, some being imprisoned, whilst others were subjected to various grizzly public executions. The movement seemed to have been finally extirpated.

Bahá'u'lláh and the emergence of the Bahá'í Faith

The killing or exile of the remaining prominent Bábís in 1852 effectively broke the movement. Those Bábís who remained true to their new-found beliefs generally kept a low profile, keeping their Bábí links a secret from all but their most trusted friends. They were also divided amongst themselves, and are likely to have been in a state of deep despair and confusion about the failure of their hopes. It would not have been surprising if the movement had ceased to exist. Certainly, that was the hope of the Iranian authorities.

In these circumstances, the reanimation of the Bábí movement was a remarkable and unexpected achievement. The driving force of this revival was Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí Núrí (1817–1892), today better known by His religious title '*Bahá'u'lláh*' (the 'Glory of God') (Smith 1987: 57–71, 2008: 16–41). Coming from a prominent landowning family of government officials, Bahá'u'lláh was a member of the Iranian elite. An early convert to Babism, He naturally assumed a leading role without becoming a formal leader. Arrested in the aftermath of the attempt on the life of the Shah (which He had opposed), He spent four months imprisoned in the noxious Black Pit prison in Tehran, where according to His own later account He had a visionary experience of a divine messenger. He was then sent into exile to Baghdad in Ottoman Iraq. Saddened by the deep divisions amongst the Bábís, He withdrew for what became a two-year retreat in the mountains of Kurdistan, where He lived a life of often solitary contemplation and befriended the local Sufis who regarded Him as a spiritual adept and teacher. Returning to Baghdad in 1856, He set about revitalizing the Bábí community, both in Baghdad and through correspondence in

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Iran, composing powerful and accessible verses and books on individual morality, the spiritual path, and the nature of prophetic fulfilment (notably the Hidden Words [1857–1858], Seven Valleys [late 1850s], and Kitáb-i-Íqán [Book of Certitude, 1861]). Very rapidly, the Bábís discovered a new spiritual leader with a powerful religious vision who both enlarged their understanding of their religion and gave them a sense of hope and meaning in the aftermath of the seeming collapse and extinction of Babism.

This revival also came to the attention of the Iranian government who requested the Ottomans to return Bahá'u'lláh to Iran or at least move Him further from their common border. The Ottomans chose to move Him and His family and entourage to Istanbul (in 1863), possibly hoping that He might be of some political use to them in their relations with the Iranians. Seeing that Bahá'u'lláh was unwilling to play a political role, they then sent the Bábí group into exile in Edirne in what is now European Turkey. Just before leaving Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh had revealed a claim to be the Báb's successor to a few of His companions, and when established in Edirne, He sent out messengers to Iran to communicate this claim to the Bábí remnant, most of whom chose to follow Him, adopting the designation of 'Bahá'ís' to indicate their allegiance. A few of the Bábís rejected these claims, following instead Bahá'u'lláh's younger half-brother Mírzá Yahyá *Ṣubḥ-i-Azal* ('Morn of Eternity') (1831/2–1912). In 1868, the Ottomans subjected both brothers and their immediate families and followers to further exile: Bahá'u'lláh to 'Akká (Acre, Acco) in Ottoman Syria and Ṣubḥ-i-Azal to Famagusta in Cyprus.

Initially confined to the old citadel in 'Akká, Bahá'u'lláh was later released into what was effectively house arrest, and then, in 1877, was allowed to retire to the surrounding countryside, where He lived comfortably until His death in 1892. Although separated from the mass of His followers in Iran (even by the direct desert route, it is over 1,300 kilometres from 'Akká to the western Iranian town of Kermanshah), He maintained effective contact with them through couriers and a network of Bahá'í 'agents' in the major Ottoman cities through which Bahá'í travellers and pilgrims might pass. Since His departure from Baghdad, He continued to write voluminously, adding to His earlier themes of spiritual and moral renewal and doctrinal exposition a new and very powerful message of social and political reform (advocating representative government, freedom from tyranny, education, agricultural improvement, religious toleration, the coming together of all the world's peoples in harmony); and proclaiming His message to selected world leaders, calling upon them to work for international peace, reduce armaments, and heed the distress of the poor—and in His letter to Queen Victoria (late 1860s), specifically praising the British for their system of constitutional monarchy and their abolition of the slave trade. He also explicitly forbade His followers from sedition and acts of political violence—distancing the Bahá'ís from their Bábí forebears, 'revealed' His own book of divine laws, the Kitab-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book, c. 1873), and appointed His eldest son 'Abbás (later generally known as 'Abdu'l-Bahá ['Servant of Bahá]) to be His successor (Smith 1987: 70–71).

By 1892, a distinctive Bahá'í community had come into being. Many of the Bahá'ís came from a Bábí background, but many were new converts drawn from the wider Shi'i population of Iran. There were also small but significant minorities of Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians who saw Bahá'u'lláh as a universal saviour, as well as a few Levantine Christians (but not Iranian Christians) and Ottoman Sunnis. Iranian Bahá'ís were also amongst the outflow of migrants to the Russian Caucasus and Central Asia, particularly the new 'frontier town' of Ashgabat (Ashkhabad) in what is now Turkmenistan, where they were delighted to find themselves recognized as a distinct and protected religious community, finally free from the attacks of hostile Shi'is. Also safe was the small scattering of Bahá'ís in British India and Burma, some of them migrant Iranians, others locally converted Muslims and Parsees (Smith 1987: 86–99).

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Although rooted in Babism, the new Bahá'í community was distinctively different. Instead of the intense messianic expectation of the Bábís, the Bahá'ís placed their hopes on the future realization of the 'Most Great Peace' referred to by Bahá'u'lláh and on the implementation of a 'modernistic' programme of social reform. The holy war paradigm of the Bábís had been firmly rejected, and the Bahá'ís proclaimed their loyalty to established governments despite the continuing reality and threat of persecution in Iran. The confined mental world of Shi'i and Shaykhi esotericism had been replaced by an allegiance to universalistic rationalism and morality (Smith 1987: 72–85).

The 'international' stage, c. 1892–c. 1953

The leadership of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1892–1921

'Abdu'l-Bahá oversaw one of the most profound transformations in Bahá'í history with the establishment of Bahá'í groups in North America and Europe (from 1894 onwards) (Smith 2004, 2008: 43–54). Although the number of new Western Bahá'ís remained small—only a few thousand people, mostly Americans—they had an importance far beyond their numbers. Energetic and not restrained by religious persecution, they were able to widely publicize their new-found faith, publish a large number of Bahá'í books and periodicals in English and other Western languages, and travel relatively freely both to spread the Bahá'í teachings internationally and to visit and encourage their coreligionists in the Middle East. Mostly coming from Christian backgrounds, they necessarily developed their own understanding of the Bahá'í tradition which stressed different elements from those emphasized in the religion's Islamic heartland—a development encouraged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself, both in His talks to visiting Western pilgrims, His extensive correspondence with the Western Bahá'ís, and in His two tours of Europe and North America (in 1911 and 1912–1913). A major geo-cultural breakthrough had been made, with the successful establishment of the religion in a culture and societies very different from that of its birth. Despite the differences between the two 'worlds' of Bahá'í activity that now existed, they remained a composite whole, firmly linked together both by common allegiance to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and contact with Him by correspondence and pilgrimage, the translation of Bahá'í scripture into European languages, and the creation of personal links by travelling Bahá'í teachers from both 'East' and 'West'.

Other major developments of the period were the consolidation of the Bahá'í doctrine of the Covenant, the expansion of Bahá'í social concerns and community activity, and the development of Bahá'í elected councils in a number of places.

The Covenant doctrine had been delineated by Bahá'u'lláh and was elaborated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Smith 1987: 73–74, 2000: 114–116). The doctrine stated that there was a divinely established Covenant regarding the succession to leadership of the Bahá'í community: those who accepted it were loyal Bahá'ís, but those who rejected it were 'Covenant-breakers'—'violators' (*náqazín*) of the Covenant. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was already His father's main helper and lieutenant during His lifetime and widely revered by the Bahá'ís, but whilst the great majority of the Bahá'ís readily accepted His authority after His father's passing, there was an extended challenge to it by dissident members of Bahá'u'lláh's own family and a few others. The Covenant doctrine then quickly became a key element in Bahá'í belief and practice, and those loyal to 'Abdu'l-Bahá both excluded the 'violators' from their community and saw ready parallels in the earlier rejection of Bahá'u'lláh by His half-brother and followers. It remained an important element in all subsequent leadership successions.

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'Abdu'l-Bahá amplified and extended Bahá'u'lláh's advocacy of social reform, including a new emphasis on the rights of women and ethnic minorities (Smith 2008: 133–147). This became embedded in the lists of basic Bahá'í principles which began to circulate at this time, and was emphasized in practice by events such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá sitting an African-American Bahá'í in the seat of honour at a banquet that had been arranged for Him in racially divided Washington, D.C. In Iran and the adjoining areas of the Russian Empire, it was expressed in a burgeoning of community activity, including the establishment of Bahá'í schools in a number of centres and even of medical facilities. These reflected both Bahá'u'lláh's social reformist agenda and the rising aspirations of many Bahá'ís. An important element was the increasing attention given to girls' education, which came to distinguish the Bahá'ís from Iranian traditionalists and underline their relative 'modernity'. These developments were particularly marked in Ashgabat. Comprised of migrant Iranians (the local Turcoman population was Sunní Muslim, and it was then illegal for the Russian Christians to change their religion), the Ashgabati Bahá'ís showed for the first time what an Iranian Bahá'í community could achieve when freed from persecution and constant repression, with the development of a wide range of Bahá'í activities and institutions, including the construction of the first Bahá'í temple in the world (started in 1902), as well as schools, a library, and other services. These developments were curtailed shortly after the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War, which followed the Revolution of 1917, but what had been achieved was impressive despite its short-lived nature (Momen 1991).

The establishment of locally elected Bahá'í councils took different forms in Iran, Russia, and the United States, but marked a clear shift away from the personalistic local leadership that had hitherto characterized Bahá'í communities.

Shoghi Effendi and the beginnings of the Bahá'í Guardianship

'Abdu'l-Bahá died in November 1921. He was then in His late seventies, but despite His age, His death was unexpected by many of the Bahá'ís, including His eldest grandson Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), who suddenly found himself appointed as 'Guardian of the Cause' in his grandfather's will (Smith 1987: 115–116; Smith 2008: 55–69). According to the will, there would be a projected line of Guardians appointed from the lineal male descendants of Bahá'u'lláh. They would be the divinely ordained interpreters of the Bahá'í writings and chair the as-yet unelected Universal House of Justice, the future supreme ruling body of the Faith referred to in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Shoghi Effendi began his Guardianship in January 1922. He had rushed back from England where he was a student at Oxford. His youth (he was only 24) and Western dress marked him as a very different leader from the venerable patriarchal figure who had preceded him, but the Bahá'ís readily rallied to their new Guardian, encouraged no doubt by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's repeated emphasis on the need for firmness in the Covenant.

Shoghi Effendi's main initial emphasis was on building up the system of Bahá'í administration internationally as a prelude to the future election of the Universal House of Justice (Smith 1987: 120–122, 2015b). This consisted of forming locally and nationally elected 'Spiritual Assemblies'. By 1925, nine national Assemblies or their equivalents had been established (Britain, Germany and Austria, Egypt, India and Burma, the United States and Canada, Iran, Iraq, the Caucasus, and Turkestan), and by 1928, 108 local Assemblies worldwide. Administrative 'consolidation' became a major goal of Bahá'í activity, and by 1949, the number of local Assemblies had been increased to 595—with the largest numbers in Iran (271), and North America (187). The formation of national Assemblies lagged behind, however (still only nine by 1948), indicating how limited Bahá'í numbers still were in much of the world (Smith 2015a).

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Shoghi Effendi returned to administrative organization in the 1950s, appointing members to serve on an 'International Bahá'í Council' (in 1950) as a preparation for the future formation of the Universal House of Justice, as well as reviving an earlier institution of 'Hands of Cause of God' (1951–1957)—eminent Bahá'ís who could serve as his representatives globally and coordinate the increasingly complex affairs of a globalizing community (Smith 1987: 126–130).

The second major initiative launched by Shoghi Effendi was the introduction of formal plans of expansion and consolidation inspired by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's missionary appeal, The Tablets of the Divine Plan (1916–1917). Starting with the first North American Seven Year Plan (1937–1944), these were initially organized at a national level, comprising goals for new Assemblies to be formed, localities and territories to be settled (often by Bahá'í 'pioneers' who would ideally be self-supporting), and sometimes establishing a Bahá'í presence in other countries. All extant national Assemblies eventually came to have such plans, culminating in an internationally coordinated 'global crusade' (1953–1963) (see more later). Marked geographical expansion was achieved—particularly in Latin America (from the late 1930s) and post-World War II Europe, but the actual numbers of Bahá'ís outside of Iran remained tiny (Smith 1987: 157–171).

Shoghi Effendi also worked to increase the amount of Bahá'í scripture in English and other languages, himself translating a number of major texts from Persian and Arabic into English; wrote extensively to share his view of the historical role and development of the Faith; and built up the 'Bahá'í World Centre' in Haifa-'Akká through the beautification of Bahá'í shrines and gardens—particularly the golden-domed Shrine of the Báb, and the construction of an elegant building to display Bahá'í relics.

The 'global' stage, c. 1953–present

Shoghi Effendi's 'global crusade' marked another major turning point in Bahá'í development. Ever since the early Western Bahá'í groups had been established in the 1890s, the Bahá'í movement had become a genuinely international faith. Apart from the large Iranian Bahá'í community, its number of adherents remained extremely limited, however (see later in this chapter), and despite putting down roots in Latin America, it had not broken out of its 'double world' of Iran and the West: the small Indian community was predominantly Persian-speaking and the new Latin American Bahá'ís were members of the Westernized middle class. All this changed dramatically after 1953, with the Bahá'ís spreading significantly in certain parts of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, India, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific islands. Some indication of this expansion can be gained from the increases in the number of Spiritual Assemblies by 1963: from 12 to 56 national Assemblies, and from 611 to 3,551 local Assemblies. As in the previous national plans, great stress had been placed on increasing the Faith's geographical diffusion and ethnic diversity, with a Bahá'í presence being established in a total of 240 'countries, significant territories and islands' by 1964, and long lists being provided of African and Native American peoples who had been contacted (there were an estimated 518 'indigenous tribes, races and ethnic groups' represented in the Faith by 1964). There had also been a massive effort to produce more translations of Bahá'í literature (into 321 languages by 1964), as well as to gain legal recognition of Bahá'í institutions wherever that was possible (*Bahá'í World* 1975: 291).

Although the global crusade had achieved successes in many parts of the world, the most significant gains were achieved in regions of the Global South which hitherto had been relatively marginal to the Bahá'í world. Thus, a provisional totalling of the number of localities where Bahá'í resided by 1963 came to over 11,000, with the traditional Bahá'í 'heartlands' of the Middle East and North America having respectively in excess of 1,390 and 1,980 localities (together around 30% of the world total). By contrast, the largest number were now in Africa and South

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Asia (respectively over 2,900 and 2,220). There were also significant numbers in Latin America and Southeast Asia (over 950 and 740). The long-established Bahá'í communities in Europe and the Antipodes remained relatively small, however (over 660 and 160). The lowest numbers were for the Pacific Islands (over 130) and Northeast Asia (over 80) (*Bahá'í World* 1970: 462).

The death of Shoghi Effendi and the custodianship of the Hands of the Cause, 1957–1963

Shoghi Effendi died unexpectedly in 1957 (aged 60) during a visit to London. He and his wife had no children, and he had previously expelled his brother, sisters, and cousins from the Faith as Covenant-breakers, so there were no eligible descendants of Bahá'u'lláh to succeed him as Guardian. Potentially, this represented a major crisis in leadership. He had, however, named the recently appointed Hands of the Cause as 'Stewards' of the Faith, and this provided the legal basis for the then 27 Hands to serve as a collective leadership. This eventuality was accepted by almost the entire Bahá'í world, although one of the veteran American Hands (Charles Mason Remey) later tried unsuccessfully to claim to be Shoghi Effendi's successor as a second Guardian (Smith 1987: 128–131, 2008: 68–69).

The main policies of the Hands were to continue Shoghi Effendi's global crusade and to prepare the Bahá'í world to elect the Universal House of Justice in 1963. Both policies were successfully carried through, the Hands pointedly excluding themselves from eligibility for election to the House of Justice. This five-and-a-half-year 'interregnum' maintained the unity of an increasingly diverse Bahá'í community, presumably again indicating the crucial importance of the doctrine of the Covenant as a cornerstone of Bahá'í practice. Remey's movement remained small and separated from the Bahá'í mainstream, and soon fractured into a number of disputing factions.

The leadership of the Universal House of Justice, 1963–present

The Universal House of Justice is an international council referred to in the Bahá'í writings to serve as the religion's supreme governing body. It is believed to be divinely guided. It is elected by the members of all extant national Spiritual Assemblies at the time of election. At present, it has nine members (all men) and has been elected every five years since first being established in 1963 (Smith 1987: 131–132, 2008: 71–77). The number of electors has increased as the number of (nine-member) national Assemblies has increased—from 504 (9 × 56) in 1963 to 1,629 (9 × 181) in 2018. The election is normally held during an international convention in which the members of the House and other Bahá'í officials are able to consult with the assembled electors about the issues facing the Faith.

Since its first election, the House has followed the precedent set by Shoghi Effendi of organizing a succession of international plans in which the Bahá'ís are urged to extend the reach and diversity of the Bahá'í community and consolidate its institutions, including the local and national Spiritual Assemblies, Bahá'í temples, and publishing trusts. It has also established an International Teaching Centre (in 1973) to oversee and coordinate the progress of the Bahá'í communities worldwide and to identify any problems which the Bahá'í may be facing, as well as a body of Counsellors to take over the work of teaching and protecting the Faith previously performed by the Hands of the Cause. In the Haifa-'Akká area, it has constructed various buildings for the religion's burgeoning administration, as well as extending the gardens surrounding the Bahá'í shrines. It has continued the process of collecting and translating the writings of the Báb,

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Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, and has overseen a number of major publications of them (some 84,000 authoritative texts had been assembled by 2012).

The most innovative policy adopted by the House has perhaps been the promotion of institutionalized learning programmes for local community building, prominently including the 'Ruhi programme' first developed by the Bahá'ís in Colombia in the 1990s. The institute process has been adopted across much of the Bahá'í world. It aims to develop locally based programmes of action amongst the participants, who may include non-Bahá'ís as well as Bahá'ís. The resultant projects reflect local concerns and are often focussed on community service and education. In some places, it has become the core of Bahá'í community activities.

The institute process is itself part of a wider range of Bahá'í activities which have been developed under the Universal House of Justice in response to the widespread expansion of the Faith since the late 1950s and in particular its spread amongst poorer and often poorly educated populations in the Global South. Other developments have included the establishment of Bahá'í radio stations (particularly in Latin America), as well as programmes to promote literacy, women's empowerment, and rural development.

The period since 1963 has also seen the growth of Bahá'í support for the work of the United Nations which had already started under the leadership of Shoghi Effendi. This has included Bahá'í involvement with UN activities addressing such issues as the protection of the environment, the rights of women and minorities, and education.

The Bahá'í Faith today is very different from the Bábí movement from which it originally derived. Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be the promised one of all religions and the revivifier of the entire human race. Bahá'ís today are drawn from all religious backgrounds and are a known presence in every country in the world apart from North Korea (and the Vatican). Iranian Bahá'ís are now a demographic minority in the religion, although the Bahá'í minority in Iran remains large and Iranian expatriates are an important element in some national Bahá'í communities. There are significant Bahá'í communities in a diverse array of countries, and the international Bahá'í leadership has become increasingly diverse, reflecting this development. Modern-day Bahá'ís may see themselves as the 'spiritual descendants' of the Bábís, but the religion they inhabit and give life to is vastly different from the messianic Shi'i sect which was its point of origin.

Statistics

We do not know how many Bábís there were—perhaps as many as 50,000–100,000 (Smith 1984). By 1900, we may guess that there were in the region of 100,000 Bahá'ís worldwide, and by the early 1950s, perhaps 200,000, rising to a million or so by the late 1960s (Smith and Momen 1989: 70–73). As to the total population of Bahá'ís today, this is uncertain—as indeed are statistics for most religious groups. The figure of over five million Bahá'ís worldwide has been widely cited since the 1990s, but the latest estimate from the *World Christian Encyclopedia* database gives a global estimate of 7.9 million adherents for 2015 (members plus those who regularly attend Bahá'í events, that is including a wider circle of sympathizers as well as declared Bahá'ís), based on country-by-country estimates (private communication). Significantly, in a recent letter elicited in response to this present publication, the Universal House of Justices' own Department of the Secretariat echoes this number, writing that 'on the basis of information received from Bahá'í communities across the world, and on reputable external sources', the current estimate for the number of Bahá'ís worldwide is 'about eight million'. They also provide an estimate for the number of localities where Bahá'ís reside as 'well over 100,000 localities' (Universal House of Justice, Secretariat, letter to Robert H. Stockman 2020). The estimates from the *World Christian*

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Encyclopedia database also provide a rough guide to the regional distributions of Bahá'ís, with the two largest concentrations of Bahá'ís being in sub-Saharan Africa (2,371,014; 29.9% of the total) and South Asia (2,126,250; 26.8%), followed by significant proportions in Southeast Asia (1,007,094; 12.7%); Latin America and the Caribbean (965,884; 12.2%); North America (600,775; 7.6%); and the Middle East and North Africa (492,494; 6.2%). By contrast, relatively few Bahá'ís live in Europe (155,112; 2.0%); Australasia (125,600; 1.6%); and Northeast Asia (74,840; 0.9%)—although in the case of Australasia, this reflects a very small host population.

As in earlier periods of Bahá'í history, the Bahá'ís themselves have tended to stress institutional achievements rather than population numbers, with the total number of localities in which Bahá'ís resided being 127,381 in 190 countries and 46 dependent territories by 2001, whilst there were then 11,740 local Bahá'í councils (Spiritual Assemblies) and 33 Bahá'í publishing trusts, Bahá'í literature had been translated into 802 languages, and some 2,112 tribes, 'races', and ethnic groups were represented in the global community (Bahá'í World Centre 2002: 277). There are presently eleven Bahá'í houses of worship, including eight 'continental' and three local ones. Others are projected, although building distinctive 'religious' rather than more utilitarian structures for administration and education has not generally been central to Bahá'í endeavour.

In the 2020 letter from the Department of the Secretariat, the following details are included: 1) The current number of administrative bodies that oversee the work of communities at the national level (i.e. national Spiritual Assemblies or their equivalent) is 192, of which 59 have also established subordinate regional-level councils (for example in the UK for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland); 2) Some 41% of those serving on elected national Bahá'í councils are female; 3) In addition to informal study classes on the Bahá'í teachings—which 'take place in settings in almost every Bahá'í community'—there is a worldwide network of around 300 training institutes offering formal programmes of Bahá'í education which so far have involved hundreds of thousands of adults and youth, as well as over 60,000 regular classes for children and 'junior youth' (aged 12–15); 4) In terms of social and economic development work, the Bahá'ís are conducting some 1,500 'sustained projects', most of them schools, and have mounted over 70,000 'fairly simple grassroots endeavours of fixed duration'. They have also established over 150 development agencies; 5) In addition to the present eleven Bahá'í Houses of Worship, plans for another four have been set in motion (it is noted that all these temples attract large numbers of visitors, the New Delhi temple alone attracting over five million visitors a year); and 6) Bahá'í marriage has now gained legal recognition in about 60 countries and territories, Bahá'í Holy Days in about 50.

The letter of the Secretariat also provides an updated figure for the number of elected local Bahá'í councils ('Spiritual Assemblies') worldwide as 'around 6,000'. As they note, this figure is 'considerably smaller' than the totals presented some decades ago, but this reflects a profound change in the Bahá'í approach to Spiritual Assembly formation since the 1990s. Whereas previously establishing local Assemblies constituted a 'central feature' of the strategy used by the Bahá'ís 'to foster the growth of the Faith in a region', this is no longer the case. A change in emphasis has been made, most importantly, on 'the development of human resources'. Now the formation of local Assemblies is often only introduced after 'certain basic elements of community life' have begun to emerge amongst a local group of Bahá'ís, notably a growth in understanding of 'the spiritual imperatives that characterize Bahá'í elections', the 'multiplication of activities that have proven indispensable to sustained growth', the 'enhancement of the devotional character of community life', and 'an efflorescence of social action'. In the past, every opportunity had been taken to form Assemblies, even in very small settings such as a single village. Although this led to a rapid rise in the number of Assemblies, many of the new Assemblies could not function without ongoing outside assistance. The new approach is designed to remedy this problem.

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Other factors were involved in the reduction of the number of Assemblies in particular countries. Thus, it has proved to be more efficient and effective in some instances to merge several local Assemblies into one, as for example in India (one of the largest single national Bahá'í communities), where at the rural level, Assembly formation had moved from the village level to that of the panchayat, which encompassed a number of villages, a change which led to a reduction of over 10,000 Assemblies. Again, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (another major centre of Bahá'í growth) the national Assembly had recently decided to consolidate 107 local Assemblies into 26 that would serve larger conurbations. Given these significant changes, the Secretariat noted that 'no comprehensive surveys' had been carried out in recent times to compile the number of local Assemblies.

Historiography

There is a flourishing Bahá'í tradition of history and biography writing in Persian dating back to the late nineteenth century. With notable exceptions (Browne 1891, 1893; Nabil-i-Zarandí 1932), this body of work remains untranslated into any Western languages. It is religious in inspiration and sometimes hagiographic in content. It continues today in a large outpouring in English and other Western languages, with a strong preference for biography. Shoghi Effendi (1974) himself wrote a masterly faith-based account of Bábí-Bahá'í history up to 1944, *God Passes By*.

Academic histories began in Europe in the nineteenth century, with the work of Edward G. Browne being of particular importance (Balyuzi 1970; Momen 1981: 17–43). Major modern historical studies have largely focussed on Babism, including works by Amanat (1989) and MacEoin (2008). MacEoin (1992) has also provided a detailed study of source materials for Bábí Studies. Cole (1998) has provided an interpretation of the early development of the Bahá'í religion. There are a large number of studies of individual Bahá'í communities (see Smith 2014, for a listing). Smith (1987) provides an overview of Bábí-Bahá'í history as a whole, as well as a detailed discussion of sources (see also Smith 2000, 2008). On some early Bahá'í statistics and 'geo-cultural expansion' see Smith (2015a, 2016).

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